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ABSTRACT

Provided are suggestions for parents who want to know how best to help their children develop study habits that will insure a good chance for school success. After a description of the importance of good study habits, the responsibilities of parents, teachers, and students for developing appropriate study settings and behaviors are set out. Subsequently discussed are: (1) concentration; (2) motivation; (3) setting of goals that are realistic, specific, have a definite deadline, and are associated with rewards; (4) use of self-talk for achievement; and (5) test anxiety. Concluding material offers parents a "quick guide" to study skills for children. Additional resources for use in helping children succeed in school are listed. (RH)

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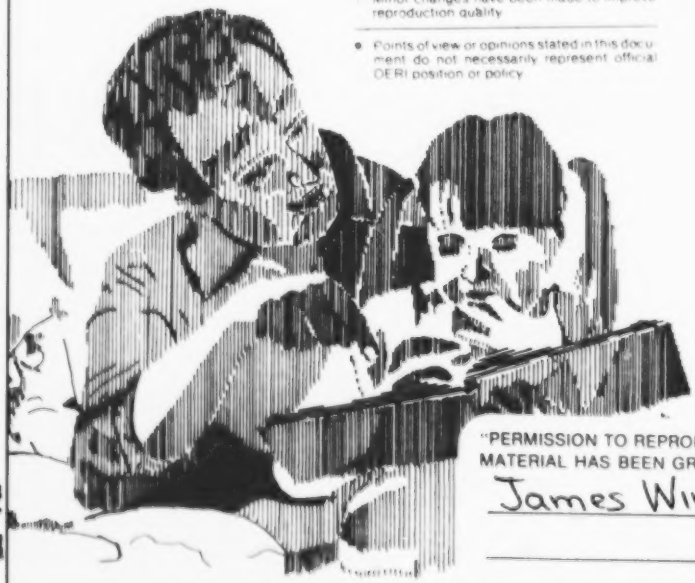
Helping Your Child Learn at School

how parents support good study habits in the home



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Raymond Maloney received his BA in Philosophy from the University of Western Ontario in London and his MA in Communication from Wayne State University in Detroit. He has taught at all grade levels from first grade through graduate level. He was founding headmaster of Kensington Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan from 1968-1983. He is currently director of The Self-Esteem Center in Birmingham, Michigan. He has done extensive work with individuals of all ages in terms of developing their full potential. Widely acclaimed as a speaker and seminar leader, he has worked throughout United States and Canada. He is the author of **How to Cure Low Self-Esteem, Pieces for Puzzled Parents,** *as well as over forty articles in popular magazines. He has been columnist for two different publications on a monthly basis. For Metro Monitor, he wrote a monthly column, "The Home and School Connection", 1983-84 and under his own byline, for* **Kidding Around,** *a magazine for parents, 1984-85. In addition, he has produced a videotape, "Self-Esteem Connections", for use in schools with teenagers, and an audiotape, "Ten Ways to Turn Out Terrific Kids", which is a version of his workshop for parents which was featured in* **Reader's Digest,** *October 1986.*

Illustration by Chris Walker

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SUPPORTING STUDY HABITS IN THE HOME
Introduction

Ten year old Scott spends several hours every night in his room doing his homework but his grades never improve and when we ask him why, all he ever says is "I don't know" (poor concentration).

Debbie, a ninth grader, continues to be frustrated by mediocre grades. Her responses are usually, "I'm dumb!", None of the teachers like me" or "The other kids all copy a lot from each other so they all do better than me" (lack of clear goals).

School goes fairly well for Mike, an eighth grader, until semester exams and test anxiety sets in and grades take a nosedive (test anxiety).

Do any of these students sound familiar? Kiddingly, homework hassles have been labelled as a major cause of divorce. There's no solid research to support that, but certainly, homework, low motivation and school problems can cause a good deal of friction in many homes.

What's a parent to do? That is the subject explored in this booklet. As with many of the parenting issues, there is a formula or set of coping skills that can be learned and can make a major difference in the success and happiness of our children. If you are a parent puzzled by how to best help your child develop study habits that will insure a better chance for school success, read on. You will learn some of the ways other kids have met the challenge of school success. More importantly perhaps, you will discover it can happen while you maintain your own sanity.

SOLID STUDY HABITS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

A few years ago, the idea of lifelong learning was merely a nice sounding phrase to promote adult education classes in the community schools. No longer. The need to keep learning, to keep updating our skills and knowledge has become essential for people in any career. The thousands of employees (many after almost a lifetime with the same company) who have been forced into early retirement, or simply laid off permanently, have learned the sad facts of life in the workplace. Today, a college degree, years of experience in one field, or top level

positions are no guarantee of a secure future. The young people beginning school now will be faced with an ongoing need to constantly apply study habits to keep up with the times and demands of a rapidly changing technology. How to study, how to learn new material, how to concentrate and stay motivated will not end with that dreaded task...homework.

As parents, we will not be merely helping our children to make it through school, in a very real way we will be helping them make it through life. Some clear guidelines and coping skills, then, are essential. They may well start with sorting out who is responsible for what when it comes to school success. Looking at this idea in terms of the work world, we can see it as a need to define job descriptions for parent, student, and school.

JOB DESCRIPTION: PARENTS

The task of supporting study habits in the home will become much easier if the lines of responsibility are clear, so let's start with you the parent.

1. Support, encouragement, honest praise and realistic criticism are among your most important tasks as a parent. Your child must know that you believe in them, their talents and limitations and that you have a clear understanding of their capabilities rather than comparing them unfavorably to a brother or sister or other students. You will be an attentive listener to their struggles **and** their successes.
2. You are the supervisor and the support system. It is up to you to provide a regular place in your home for children to study in a quiet, comfortable place that has all study tools: pens, pencils, paper, dictionary and other needs. Radio, stereo, television, telephone are not helpful in this place.
3. You establish the best time for studying. This will differ from one home to another based on the schedule of other activities in the family. The actual hours set are not as important as the need for them to be regular, at least Monday through Friday, and some regular time on the weekend, depending on the age and grade level of the child. Nothing short of a major disaster in the home should alter these times. Needing to call a friend to discuss what they will wear to school tomorrow is not acceptable as a major disaster.

4. You, or another responsible adult, need to be present in the home during the study time for supervision and assistance with a homework problem. This does not mean you are to do the work for your child, no matter what style of tantrum they may choose to force you into this.
5. At all times, you as parent are the advocate with the school to make sure they are doing their job and to keep informed of their expectation for your child. You will need to have regular contact with your child's teacher(s), not just at crisis times. You will know about all school events, report card times and conferences.

JOB DESCRIPTION: TEACHERS

The second member of the team working to provide the best possible chance for success for your child is the professionally trained and experienced teacher.

1. It is the teacher's main task to provide the basic input in skills, information, training and development.
2. They will evaluate your child based on the level of skills and capabilities that have been established by testing and other observations. In terms of homework assignments turned in and quizzes or tests given, the teacher needs to give the student feedback as quickly as possible so real learning can take place from these experiences.
3. Teachers are the role models as far as how to study and grow through learning. They are the professionals with the information about how children develop academically, socially and emotionally. They can be expected to share this information with a parent as it applies to your child.
4. It is reasonable to expect the teacher will be available for extra assistance to a student when needed and also to be available to parents at mutually agreeable times.

JOB DESCRIPTION: STUDENTS

The third member of the learning team...the one the other two are there for, is the student. They may see themselves as the "victim" caught in the plot to make life difficult for them by all demands of learning. It is important they realize from the very

beginning of school life that school is their main "job" at least through 12th grade.

1. Students...not the other two members of the team...are responsible for the actual work being produced. It is the students' task to develop the skills and gain the knowledge in all areas which will make them ready to deal with life situations.
2. They will keep informed of what is expected of them by way of assignments, tests, quizzes, class participation and anything else that goes into determining their grade. As painful as the report card may be, it is valuable to learn early they will be "graded" for the rest of their work life. Pay raises, promotions, perks will replace letter grades but these will be decided by many of the same kinds of factors.
3. Part time jobs, after school activities, budding romances, hanging out at the mall (even though essential parts of life in the growing lane) are not the main stuff of school success. Sorting out priorities, in fact, may consume a great deal of energy and provide the fuel for many parent/student conflicts.

WHAT'S IN A GRADE? A lot of things that many students take a long time to realize. We will take a closer look at three:

- Concentration
- Motivation
- Goal setting

CONCENTRATION

Many times, students will complain they are bored in school. They may even use this as an excuse to con a parent into thinking the teacher is unusually dull and the subject uninteresting. They hope that will get them off the hook when a poor grade shows up on a report card. Quite often it is not boredom but lack of concentration that is the problem. Students don't always realize a teacher can recognize when the student's mind is somewhere else than on the task at hand. If this happens a lot, the result is going to show up in a lower grade.

Someone has defined concentration as "training the mind to behave itself." The idea of training the mind would seem strange

to students who believe that concentration is a special gift that only bright kids get. Not concentrating is a habit that may begin even before children start school. If they allow their minds to simply leap from one idea to another, and their bodies to go from one activity to another without completing any, they will not understand the value of concentration.

Even before they begin school you can help your children with this important learning tool by having them tell, in some detail, about a picture they are looking at, or a vacation spot you have enjoyed together. This trains the young mind to hold onto details and to focus on the entire situation or story. Like all things we will discuss in this booklet, they can become habits for a lifetime with a little practice.

Better they should have some of that practice out of the school setting so that it will be a natural tool they will have as they listen and concentrate on directions, explanations, and ideas at school.

Some ways to build the habit of concentration:

1. Encourage children to develop the habit of listening for details when someone is talking or explaining something. Linking those details together into a whole is a great mind exercise.
2. As they listen, suggest they make up questions about information they are hearing or reading so that rather than their mind wandering it will be searching for answers to their questions.
3. Practice this at home with short readings. Have your child give a brief, one or two sentence summary at the end of the reading. If important details have been left out, have the child go back to the reading and notice them. This could also be done after watching a TV program. There is no rule that says you can't develop valuable habits while enjoying yourself.

MOTIVATION

How many parents have read on a child's report card at one time or another, "your child lacks motivation". That's about as helpful as the answer children usually give when you ask them why they did something, "I don't know." What motivation even is, has escaped educators and researchers for years. Now we

have a better understanding of it and know, for example, that everyone is motivated...even your child holding the report card with the negative motivation message. Basically, motivation is what gets us to do anything based on "what is in it for us." When you first hear it put that way, you probably think that sounds very selfish. Well, be that as it may, that is the truth of motivation. It also explains why many children and not a few adults, appear to lack motivation. It is not that they are not motivated, which would mean they don't want to do anything, it's simply they are not motivated toward doing the things we would prefer they do — like school work.

If talking on the phone, watching hours and hours of television or simply "hanging out" with friends is how children spend a lot of their time, that means that's what motivates them. Doing things we don't enjoy is not very common for any of us. To be motivated we need to experience some satisfaction, some success in the activity. As far as school work goes, what a vicious circle that can become. If children don't put their energy into school work they most likely will not succeed — so no satisfaction. Followed by no motivation.

Some ways to break this cycle:

1. When they bring home a low or failing grade on a test, discuss the test with them. Help them to see, by leading questions, where the difficulty came from: lack of study, lack of planning time before the test, poor note-taking skills, maybe even lack of concentration in class. Help them to begin to see that with some changes in habits, more success would come. Success tastes good to all of us, so a small taste may well attract us to get more — that's motivation.
2. Accept the fact that you cannot **change** anyone else, even your child, as much as you might wish to do so. You can encourage, invite, inspire to action, but forcing is not an effective motivator. Catch them doing something positive about growth in learning and you will find them motivated to repeat and increase that activity. After all, remember they do want to please their parents...a great motivator.
3. Help them set goals for success.

SETTING GOALS

Often when listening to your children, you may get the impression that everyone else's children got all the brains, luck, good fortune, best teachers and easy assignments. It takes a while for students to realize that the successful students attend the same classes as your child, have the same number of hours to get assignments done and have to deal with those same teachers your child may be labeling "impossible." What your child may lack is a focus to their more positive energy — or personal goals. Goals are the fuel that keeps the success plan in motion. Goals have been a vital part of successful businesses for years, but it is only in the past few years the idea of goal setting has crept into everyday life for the rest of us.

If followed faithfully for a reasonable time period, here is a sure-fire path to success for your child not only in school but for all of life. To make it work you need to help your child stick with all four pieces.

THE GOALS NEED TO BE:

1. **REALISTIC** for your child. This will mean that each of your children will be working on very different goals. The goals cannot be imposed on the child, it needs to be an activity that is planned with them (remember, you cannot force **anybody** to change). You will do your child a lifetime favor if you have them look at their talents realistically and then help them decide what is most realistic for them. Keep in mind you are helping them plan a SUCCESS experience so all these parts have to be put together in a way that presents the greatest opportunity for success. Start the goal setting idea with a simple goal that will challenge them, but not frustrate them with it's difficulty **for them.**
2. **SPECIFIC.** Many failures result from goals that are too vague. It is easy to cop out of a goal that is so vague you can never really be sure if it has been accomplished. For example, a too vague goal would be, 'I'll do better next term." Many parents accept that as a goal because it has a nice ring to it and sounds so hopeful. More specific and more likely to be carried out would be, "I will raise my math grade one full letter grade in the next two weeks." Which brings us to the third point.

3. **DEFINITE DEADLINE.** New Year's resolutions usually don't work because the time frame is too long. It allows too much time to keep putting it off. The deadline for the goal will depend on the age of the child, their past history of success at something like goals and the difficulty of the goal. Usually, if a child has not been having success in the area you wish to work on, the shorter the goal, the more likely the success. Even three days would be great. Saying to a child, for example, you have to bring all your grades up by the end of the next semester, is of little value. Most children cannot even decide what they're going to do on the weekend; the end of the next semester takes it into the 21st century. Again it is a matter of tasting some success, so it needs to happen soon, before the child runs out of enthusiasm. The final goal piece helps with this also.

4. **REWARD.** All children love this part. Before they make the decision to try to achieve the goal, you help them decide what they would like as a reward for the completion of the goal. Adults sometimes say, simply achieving the goal itself is reward enough. Not many children will buy into that idea. After all, you are asking them to make a great change in their pattern of dealing with school demands. The reward might be a special chance to watch a favorite TV program they don't ordinarily get to watch, or a special snack of their choosing. The size or expense of the reward is not the important part as much as that it be something they choose to work for. Money is the least successful reward because it sets up connection between money and self-motivation, which you may later regret.

Plan this goal setting project with your child. Encourage the progress. Reward the outcome. If they fail, again, the short term works in your favor. You can easily start over. As they become more successful at achieving the difficulty, the length of time and the reward will increase. So will their feelings of being successful. Then point out to them, proudly, YOU DID IT! A great time to remind them, the power to succeed is in **their hands.**

OTHER HELPFUL HABITS:

SELF-TALK is a study technique not many students (or parents, for that matter) are aware of. Athletes have been using it for years with wonderful results. It is a technique of talking yourself into achieving. Let's go back to concentration for an example. Say a child is studying for an exam and they realize they are losing their concentration on the reading material. Instead of saying "Oh, what the heck, I'm never going to get this straight so why bother", they could just as easily train themselves to say, "I'm going to feel great when I get this test paper back and look at the great grade." Both cases are self-talk, but the difference is that the second one is much more positive and supportive of the student's efforts, so much more likely to create success.

It's an idea that has been around since the 30's when Dr. Norman Vincent Peale wrote the *Power of Positive Thinking*, but only in the past few years have young people began to discover it really works. It's a form of praising and encouraging yourself — a much better habit than putting yourself down or blaming other people for your poor success. Practice this with your child and watch the smiles of satisfaction as they see it begin to work. The idea might even rub off on your own parenting efforts — a nice little bonus for your efforts at helping your child develop study habits.

TEST ANXIETY

Remember eighth grade Mike whom you met at the beginning of this booklet. Everything went well for him until test time. Like school phobia, test anxiety is a real pain experienced by many students. Fortunately there are a number of things you can do to help the stress if this is a problem for one of your children.

1. You might want to remind your child of Franklin Roosevelt's famous words, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." It might not ease the pain instantly but it can open the door to dealing with the anxiety one piece at a time. In fact, time is the issue for many children. They haven't planned well and are suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of plowing through all that material with only a few hours until test time. If you have

done **your** homework you will be aware of the test date well in advance and can suggest that study and review begin well ahead of that date.

2. If you haven't helped them with the note-taking techniques, this is a good time to reinforce the value of taking notes as they read (increases concentration also!). Suggest they form questions about the material, guided by the large print headings in the text and by notes taken in class (they do take notes in class, right?). As they find the answers to their questions they can jot down these in their notes, which should be brief. They will use these notes as their "last night before the big day" review.
3. Each night as they review the material you might take five or ten minutes to quiz them orally on the key points. Don't let them waste time going over material they already know. Instead, focus on the pieces they're still unsure of.
4. The final night before the test or exam do a quick overview review. Relax (deliberately) and then get a good night sleep. Leave in the morning fortified with a solid breakfast. Above all, don't do as one mother does and have your departing words be "I'll love it if you get an A." A comment guaranteed to bring on an anxiety attack.

FINALLY, YOUR VERY OWN PARENT QUICK GUIDE TO STUDY SKILLS FOR YOUR CHILDREN

1. Is your child having academic difficulty that you or the teacher cannot explain? Have their eyes, ears, allergies, etc. checked. Many school problems come from undiscovered physical difficulties.
2. In some way check for possible learning disabilities. As troublesome as these can be for children, many times they are not easily detected. Sometimes children have become experts at covering them with coping skills of their own.
3. Don't let yourself get drawn into doing your child's work for them. This is especially important with bigger science or social studies projects that can easily become overly ambitious and then need the whole family to complete. Remember where this **work** belongs on the job descriptions.

4. Remember, if you don't expect enough of your child, they won't deliver much. If you expect too much, they will give up in frustration. If you don't value school, neither will your children. Praise and support them realistically for real effort and they will thrive.
5. Last and perhaps most important of all, keep your sense of humor...a lot of things about school can be scary for children. Dealing with all the social aspects of friends and clothes and dating uses up a lot of energy that isn't there for academics. You and they both will survive longer and happier by keeping the rest of life in balance.

No doubt about it, study skills are important tools for life but so is the ability to enjoy a good laugh.

MORE RESOURCES FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD WITH SCHOOL SUCCESS

- **Coping With Kids and School: A Guide For Parents.** Linda Albert, Ballentine Books, New York, 1984.
- **What Did You Learn In School Today?** Baron, Baron and MacDonald, Warner Books, New York, 1983.
- **Teaching Children Responsibility.** Linda and Richard Eyre, Ballantine Books, New York, 1982.
- **Double Your Child's Grades In School.** Paul Graydon, Coles Publishing, 1978.
- **Help Me Learn.** Mary E. Rice and Charles H. Hatter, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1979.
- **Scholastic's A+ Guide to Research And Term Papers.** Louise Colligan, New York, 1981.
- **Making College Pay Off.** Adele Scheele, Ballantine Books, New York, 1983.
- **Helping Your Child Develop His Responsibilities.** Ruth Strang, Award Books, 1970.

Check with your child's teachers or counselors for additional material that may relate directly to your child's grade level and needs.